

Date: 4 May 1983

Place of

Interview: Fleetwood/Jourdain Recreation Centre, Evanston

Interview With: Mr. James Avery

Interviewed By: Nancy Lawler

Observations: I met Mr. Avery at the Foster Club meeting. I introduced myself and asked him if he'd mind being interviewed. He very kindly spoke to me for one and one-half hours.

Q. Were you born in Evanston?

A. No. I came here in 1924.

Q. What school did you go to?

A. I started in Noyes. We lived behind Dewey School. Mr. Skiles - you've heard of him - was the superintendant - was transferring all the black kids to Foster. My mother said, no! She went to see Skiles and my sisters ended up in Dewey and I went to Noyes.

Q. When were you born?

A. 1917. We came here in 1924.

Q. Did you stay at Noyes.

A. I went to Foster for junior high school. We lived on the west side. They tore down a old school on Lincoln and East Prairie to build Haven School.

Q. I've heard they moved a lot of houses that blacks owned into the black neighborhoods.

A. Yes - houses that were on Dodge and some of the houses that were located where Wieboldts is now. Evanston changed a lot. My aunts lived in different parts of the city. The El wasn't an El then - the tracks were on the ground after Church street. When it was elevated in the thirties, they moved out all the black families that had lived on both sides of the tracks. They built Sherman Gardens and other apartment buildings.

Q. What is your occupation?

A. I just retired a few weeks ago. I worked for the state.

Q. Did you belong to any clubs?

A. The Evanston YMCA and the LTL - _____ Temperance League which met at the Wheaton Church on Noyes and Ridge. My mother made me go. They used to give speeches about the evils of drink.

Q. Was the league all black?

A. No. It wasn't segregated. My mother was the biggest influence upon me. I had to take all the kids to school and home again. I had to supervise them. My mother did day work and wasn't always home.

Q. Were you the oldest?

A. Yes. I had to be an example for the rest of the kids. There was one advantage - anytime there were new clothes I got to wear them first.

Q. When you were growing up did you ever get mad - angry at racial conditions?

A. Not until after the war. Before I accepted it all. I was never really upset. You see, my parents were from Georgia. Things were a lot worse there. They had a farm. The boll weevil drove them out. It didn't bother me that there were places I couldn't go to.

Q. What about your friends - did it bother them?

A. Some of them. I had a friend who went to Haven School. You know when black kids graduated they didn't get handed their diplomas. They just picked them out of the pile. Only the white kids walked across the stage. My family was very proud. Whatever we had - we had. My mother made us change our clothes after school. We had different clothes for church too.

Q. What did your father do?

A. He was a construction worker.

Q. What did you do for fun?

A. We didn't go to poolrooms or speakeasies. There were plenty of them. They were off limits in our family. I still don't play pool. I wanted to play football, baseball and basketball then. That's how I got my scholarship.

Q. To which college?

A. Langston College in Oklahoma. You didn't have to be tall to play basketball then. We only had one tall guy - the center.

Q. When did you go to college?

A. 1936-37.

Q. Were you good at football?

A. If you weren't good the coach would break your plate. There were five kids from Illinois at the school. The coach, Frank Gales had a nephew in the state.

Q. Was Langston a black college?

A. Yes. All black - students and teachers. It was the first black school I ever attended. The first black teachers I ever had.

Q. Were there no black teachers in Evanston?

A. No. There was one black janitor - that was it. These were the first black teachers I'd ever seen. The first men teachers too. All the teachers in Evanston were women.

Q. How did it feel to have black teachers?

A. It was wonderful.

Q. You said that you'd had some trouble at Evanston High School. Could you tell me about it.

A. Lots of trouble. They tried to put me and all the other blacks in X classes.

Q. What were they?

A. Non-college preparatory classes. When we found out what they were - they never told us - my mother wouldn't accept that. They had a great system for seating us in classes. It was alphabetical. Now my name starts with A - there were only one or two other black kids - one was John Barber - but I always sat by myself or with another black kid. Some alphabetical system. I'll tell you this - it made me work hard. I wanted to excell - over every white student in class. In each class I tried to do it and I taught my kids to do the same.

Q. Did you know what they were doing to you?

A. I knew they didn't want me to go to college. One teacher said why are you in this class? You're not going to college. That was Miss Sadie Rafferty - Bacon was the superintendant then. But we got a lot of support from our own people. My greatest inspiration was the Church and the Y. We knew everyone then. An adult would see me and say - aren't you one of the Avery boys? There were no real problems. We were always recognized. We felt safe. The neighbors were always on the lookout for you - there was always room for an extra kid at the table. We always fed other kids. Whatever we had we shared. I couldn't understand this at the time. My dad worked hard and we didn't have much. It was much later that I understood. The Y was great. It kept you in line. We used to go to state-wide conferences - for the older boys. They were held once a year - all over the state - any place where they had black Y's. We had our own proms. We couldn't have it with the white kids (in high school).

Q. It never made you angry?

A. Never. We had our own prom. We rented the Nichols School Gym. I was manager. We had our own music.

Q. You just accepted it.

A. I didn't look for trouble. A few friends did. As a rule - no. Even when we went to the theatre - we had to sit upstairs. It never bothered me. I used to go to church. All the pretty girls were there.

Q. Did you meet your wife there?

A. No - at college. Oklahoma was paradise. All black students and teachers. It was a beautiful sight. There were a lot of Indian girls too. It wasn't that I hadn't been with blacks before. I used to take the El to the south side - 25¢ round trip - for parties-to socialize - I was around a lot of blacks - but this was different. This (college) was twenty-four hours a day. A most beautiful sight.

Q. Did your attitude change after school? Were you less willing to accept things?

A. That didn't change me as much as the Navy. I had a lot of bad experiences in the south. I saw a race riot in Detroit in 1943.

Q. Was this when you were in the Navy?

A. No. I went to Detroit to get a defense job. I left the Navy as a Bosun's mate. Trained at Great Lakes then I went overseas. Took troop transports to the islands. I was stationed in Oahu for two years.

Q. That doesn't sound too bad.

A. It was beautiful but I saw other guys doing the same things that I was doing and being treated differently. Guess I just accepted it.

Q. What happened when the war was over?

A. I went to get my wife. I'd been gone for 2 years and 11 months. I took the train to Denver - the Zephyr - then the Santa Fe bus to Boulder. I didn't want to wait overnight for the train. The bus stopped in Colorado Springs. I was in uniform, had all my papers, my gifts, all my things with me. I got off the bus and went into the stop. It was a lunch counter. I was the only black on the bus. There were other nationalities in the rest stop. The lady (waitress) walked up and said - "You can't be served in here. Go around back." I didn't want anything but I told her 'I ain't going anywhere.' Had I known I wouldn't have got off the bus. The bus driver hadn't said anything. We'd spent our honeymoon in Colorado Springs. No trouble. I was only 45 miles away from my family. I hadn't seen my wife for two years and eleven months. I wasn't going anywhere.

Q. What happened?

A. The lady called the police. They came and drove me around for a while to cool me off. The bus left. All my things were in the bus. My wife was waiting in Pueblo. I didn't care. I was mad. I caught the next bus. My wife was still waiting. She had all my things. The driver saw her there and handed her my stuff. He said, - "Are you waiting for a black sailor?" He just handed her the lot - after all she was a black woman. I was ready for a fight then - for a long time I'd go places just waiting for a white person to bump into me. I was bitter.

Q. Why did you come back to Evanston?

A. My parents had a grocery store. They wanted me to run it. Otherwise I would probably have gone back to Michigan.

Q. Did you feel differently about things then?

A. Yes. I went downtown to the market in my uniform to buy things for the store. Some things - mostly meat and oils - were still rationed then. I told the men at the market - "I need meat for the store. I didn't use my rations before - I wasn't here - I was in the war." I insisted on getting that meat. I had changed. I was bitter. I had gone and done my duty - now I was back and I had to take the same crap. I wasn't going to - I was very aggressive.

Q. Did this change upset your parents?

A. You see, my mother was very proud. When she was in service I did the kitchen and bathrooms for her-to help her. She taught me to clean and cook. I asked why? She said I might need to do it for myself someday. My mother was a dominant person. She made the rules. She would work for you but you paid her for what she did. No yass m'am or no m' am - no bowing or scraping. Once I was shopping with her in Lord's Dept. Store. She was buying lingerie. One of the ladies she worked for came in - a white lady. "Oh Mary I didn't know you shopped here." My mother said: "They look just as good around my black as around your white one."

Q. She sounds like quite a woman.

A. She was. She died two years ago. She was 86. Once my brother - a chauffeur - drove a man to Alabama. He got in trouble down there - he cut off a white woman or something. My mother called Governor Green (Illinois) - she didn't know him - and told him about the trouble. The governor got him out I found that amazing.

Q. Do you remember Jourdain's first election?

A. I guess so - there were so many. They were all Republicans in the 5th ward. My mother was a Republican until the day she died - a Baptist and a Republican.

Q. Even FDR didn't change her.

A. No. She was from the South. Her experiences with the Democrats down south kept her a Republican.

At this point, Mrs. Avery, Mrs. Dorothy Jones, and Mrs. Geneva Lee came over and joined the conversation. This conversation is reported separately.

